

Paint the Night Red

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Summary

Shortly after returning to Earth, Chris goes to a bar to drown his sorrows. Ash finds him.

Notes

Written for borrowedphrases in the 2020 Robot Rainbow exchange. Originally posted on AO3.

Chris finishes his drink and orders another, already starting to feel a faint buzz from the alcohol. The bar around him is dim and run down, not his usual choice of venue, but it has the benefit of being as far from Starfleet Headquarters as one can get without actually leaving the city, and that's all he's looking for right now. Here, in civilian clothes with no braid on his arm, he doesn't have to be Christopher Pike, captain of the *Enterprise*. He can be just like everyone else.

It can't last, he knows, but for now there's a certain comfort in being anonymous.

He's halfway through his third drink when a shadow falls across his table and a familiar voice asks, "Is this seat taken?"

Chris suppresses a sigh, glancing up to see Ash Tyler watching him intently. "If I say yes, will you leave?"

"Probably not," Ash admits, slipping into the seat opposite. "What're you drinking?"

Chris looks down at the red liquid in his glass, frowning. If he's honest, he's been ordering more or less at random, not really caring what he drank as long as it was alcoholic and not obviously lethal. "I think it's called a Starburst."

Ash nods. "Sounds great." He taps at the menu, and reaches out to grab his glass as it emerges from the hole in the middle of the table.

Chris takes a gulp of his own drink, steeling himself for the conversation ahead. "What are you doing here, Ash?"

He'd half-expected someone to track him down, but he'd thought it would be Phil, or Una. Not the new head of Section 31, who presumably has better things to do.

Ash fiddles with the edge of his glass before wrapping his fingers around it tightly. "Your first officer contacted me. She's worried about you."

Of course she is, Chris thinks. He'd thought he was doing a pretty good job of acting normally, but Una has always been able to see through him. It's an excellent quality in a first officer, but a somewhat annoying one in a friend. "So she sent you?"

Ash shrugs. "I think she thinks it has something to do with- well. What we went through, with the ship and everything. I guess she thought I could relate."

Chris almost laughs. As if anyone can relate to what he's going through. "It doesn't. And you can't."

Not that he doesn't miss *Discovery* and her crew, because he does, fiercely. But that's not what he sees when he shuts his eyes.

"Okay," Ash says simply, and Chris blinks.

"Okay?" he repeats cautiously. "That's it?"

Ash shrugs again. "Whatever you're dealing with, it's your business. If you want to talk, I'll listen, but if not I'm more than willing to just sit here and get drunk with you." He downs half of his glass in one go as if to demonstrate.

"I don't need a babysitter," Chris tells him.

"I know," Ash replies. "But I think you need *someone*. And I... I know what that's like."

It isn't much, but the burden on Chris's shoulders seems to lift, just a fraction. "Guess I'd better order another round, then."

Ash smiles briefly. "Guess so."

* * *

It's almost midnight by the time they leave the bar, Chris a little unsteady on his feet but feeling lighter than he has in months. Ash braces himself against a wall and pulls out his communicator, and Chris can't resist moving closer, leaning against the wall beside him.

"Taxi should be here in a couple of minutes," Ash reports, shoving the communicator back in his pocket.

"That's good," Chris mumbles. They're close enough to touch, and he imagines what it would be like to reach out, feel Ash's skin under his fingertips.

He shouldn't, he knows. He should leave, right now, before he does something he'll regret. It's the right thing to do.

But 'doing the right thing' is why he's here, drinking in some out of the way hole, why his friends are worried about him, why he can't sleep from nightmares, and he's tired, so very tired of it all.

He reaches up to touch Ash's shoulder, warm and solid and real. Then, before he can think further, he leans in and kisses him.

It takes a second, but then Ash kisses back, hands gripping Chris's waist and pulling him closer. They break apart, panting, just as Ash's communicator beeps. "Taxi's here."

"My place?" Chris suggests, before pulling him into another kiss.

"Yeah," Ash agrees, pressing their foreheads together briefly. "Whatever you want."

* * *

Chris's first thought when he wakes up is *Ow*, followed by *I'm getting too old for this*. His head is pounding and his stomach is threatening revolt. It's been years since he had a hangover this bad, and he can't say he's missed it.

Memories of the previous night rush through his head, but when he gets up the courage to open his eyes, he's alone. He takes stock of the situation – he's in his bedroom, he's naked, and that is definitely not his jacket on the chair which means Ash must still be around here somewhere.

He gets up slowly and pulls on a robe before making his way out of the bedroom. He finds Ash in the kitchen, drinking a cup of coffee and looking not much better than Chris feels.

"Good morning," Ash greets. "Hope you don't mind." He holds up the coffee.

"Not if you make me one," Chris says, slipping into a seat at the table. "Black, one sugar."

Ash does so, setting a cup in front of Chris before sitting down opposite. Chris shakes off a sudden rush of *deja vu* and takes a sip, savouring the caffeine.

"So," Ash begins awkwardly, staring down at his coffee. "Do you, uh, remember what happened last night?"

"Yes," Chris replies. "Do you?"

Ash nods, gaze still fixed on his cup. "Do you regret it?"

"No." It's an instinctive response, but, Chris realises, it's also true. As bad as he feels right now, last night was the first time in a long time that he was able to sleep without nightmares, and he can't regret that.

Ash looks up, then, a faint smile spreading across his face. "Me neither."

"Maybe we could do it again sometime?" Chris suggests, ignoring the voice in the back of his head that still insists he's making a mistake. Maybe he is, but it's his mistake to make.

Well, his and Ash's.

"Yeah," Ash says. "I'd like that." He reaches out, touching Chris's hand briefly and adds, "And I'm still willing to listen. If you ever want to talk."

"I know," Chris says. "I'll think about it."

He isn't okay, not even close, but he's... coping. This might all end in disaster, but for now it's the closest he's had to happiness or peace in weeks, and he's going to hold on to it for as long as he can.

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